

**Statement by Representative Robert Wexler
Senate Committee on Rules
June 28, 2001**

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Senators,

America is the freest and most prosperous nation on earth.
We are the strongest and most resilient democracy on the planet.
Yet last November,
we failed our citizens in the most fundamental way.

The right to vote cuts to the very bone of our democracy.
When tens of thousands of Americans cast their ballots -
only to have them thrown out -
Whether you like the results of the Presidential election or not -
It is undeniable that something is wrong in America.
If we fail to learn from this tragic experience -
then shame on us.

What happened in Palm Beach County, Florida
on election day is personal to me.
I saw it with my own eyes.
I experienced it myself.
I stood in front of voting precincts
and witnessed a horrible state of confusion.

I am here today representing the citizens of my district
who went to vote on election day
only to be confronted with a puzzle rather than a ballot.

I watched the dismay and felt the anger of patriotic Americans,
many of whom fought in World War II and Korea,
and haven't missed an election in over 50 years,
as their votes were rendered meaningless.

I am here to give a voice to those Floridians
whose votes were callously discarded
due to a ballot that was so confusing
intelligent men and women unknowingly cast two votes for President
or one vote for the wrong man.

I am here because the collapse of the election system in Florida was not color-blind.

The facts speak for themselves.

54% of Florida's discarded ballots were cast by African-Americans, even though African-Americans only comprise 11% of Florida's voters.

Think about that -

African-American voters were ten times more likely than White voters to have their ballots rejected in Florida.

This reality is indefensible

and we must act now to repair our citizens faith in the system.

Have no doubt about it, this is not just a Florida problem.

It stretches coast to coast.

Many of the problems that confronted Florida on election day occurred in other states.

In fact, more votes were thrown out in Illinois than in Florida.

This is a federal problem that demands federal attention.

What happened in Florida on election day highlighted for the entire world

that in America, even for a Presidential election,

we have no national standards for the design of ballots -

we have no national standards for the counting of ballots -

we have no national standards for voting machinery -

we have no national standards to prevent thousands of Americans from being purged from voter roles -

and we have no reliable way to count the overseas ballots of the men and women in the military.

What we do have in America is partisan election officials deciding which votes count.

Truth be told,

we do have an equal protection problem in America.

This past November in Florida -

African-Americans were not equally protected -

The Floridians wrongfully purged from voter rolls were not equally protected -

Overseas servicemen and women casting absentee ballots were not equally protected -

All Floridians were not equally protected when certain absentee voters had their ballots doctored by partisan representatives inside county election offices.

And yes, thousands of my constituents
who still choke up when they hear the star spangled banner
because they love America so much
were not equally protected when they intended to vote for Al Gore
whose name was second but whose punch hole was third.

The good news is - this problem can be solved,
but we must commit the necessary resources.

I strongly support the legislation sponsored by
Senator Dodd and Representative Conyers.
It exemplifies the level of commitment needed
to fix the problems that plagued the 2000 election.

I also endorse the bill sponsored by Representative Hoyer
that would eliminate the punch card system.

Electoral Reform must not be a partisan cause.
It is our national obligation.

It has been eight long months since the Presidential election.
It is time for Congress to take aggressive action.

I applaud Senator Dodd for calling this hearing,
but I must call attention to the devastating silence
from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

President George W. Bush must be the only person in America
who has forgotten what happened on election day.

----- Election-2000 was a wake-up call - -----
to all Americans -
that we must not take our democracy for granted.

We must commit the money, the resources and the energy
to fix our election process once and for all.
To do anything less is unforgivable.